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Open Letter to Lia Rushton

LINDA FROST

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I want to write this response as a letter to you, Lia, in part because I worked with you in helping national scholarship applicants at the University of Alabama at Birmingham but also because I know you are the kind of person who fully commits herself to the conversation at hand. What you emphasized in your essay and in all your years as a national fellowships advisor was the key importance of listening. I observed firsthand that your skill as a listener made you the successful, trailblazing, and legendary scholarships advisor that you were at UAB, focusing first and last on creating relationships with the students and understanding who they were before you decided how to steer them in the advising that came later.

Your essay captures and evidences how we can and should think about scholarship applicants. I have learned, like you, that these students often become important people in my life overall, visiting or even staying at my house, jumping with my daughters on their trampoline, sharing holidays with me, and sharing their sorrows. First at UAB, then at Eastern Kentucky University, and now at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, I too have forged bonds with these students such that they have become part of my

family circle. I even, in a way, named one of my daughters after one of them, and my Lucy and I went to the Truman-winner's wedding together.

We generally focus on what national scholarships advising means to the student, but equally significant is what it means for the advisor. Working with smart, ambitious students is not inherently wonderful; students like that can be fun to teach, but they can also plague you with disdain in a way that is deeply discouraging. They can enrage you because they won't live up to their potential; they can be little nasty stink bombs of privilege; and even at the regional comprehensive institutions where I have worked, places where Pell grantees are plentiful, I have encountered some atrocious bad apples.

The national scholarship applicants I have advised, however, have always been a pleasure. In fact, the process makes it almost impossible for the experience to be less than wonderful because it dictates that the advisor get to know the students well in order to do the job. Walking a student through a Truman application, for instance, is a dream come true for the English professor who lives inside many of us honors administrators. Students spend hours clarifying who they are and what they imagine they might become in the form of thirteen separate short personal narratives, and they do this with no thought for the grade it will bring them. Sure, they want to win, but there is no clear rubric for that, and while you can tell freshman composition students and creative writing students all day that their writing needs to be honest and authentic, this advice is Truth writ large for scholarship applicants. If the writing is anything but honest and authentic, it will not win anyone anything.

The ring of honesty comes via vividly conveyed, specific details such as we always beg students to give us. I still remember the description one student wrote of a drowning man he was trying to save during a flood; the man's awful color sticks with me. Working with students on national scholarships means getting to know them powerfully because you know them through their prose, and when I stop to think about the people with whom I have the greatest bonds in my life, they are almost all people with whom I have shared writing. Writing is a powerful path to intimacy. Working through a written text is difficult, humbling, revealing, triumphant, empowering, and always in the end—usually not so much in the middle—energizing. Sharing that experience with someone else revs up the intensity of all those adjectives.

To everyone who is not you, Lia, I say this: advising a student who is working on a national scholarship application is the heart of teaching writing. Yes, you have to get rid of those verbal tics, and sometimes you even have to go shopping with the candidate for his suit and tie, a tie that must be tied

in advance so he can slip it over his head before his interview, but the long stretch of meetings before that moment—the endlessly circulating drafts, drafts that say what should be said, drafts that suggest what could be said, drafts with holes the size of Oxford in them, leaving out what must be said—build the relationship and give it life.

Advising students applying for these prestigious awards is emblematic of what I have always loved about working with students in general: seeing who they are really, pointing out the amazing parts of themselves they may never have seen—Wallace’s water in your account, Lia—and watching all of that unfold in a piece of writing that moves from image to image to narrative like some crazy cinematic dream that crystalizes into meaning in the morning.

The advice you give to national scholarship advisors can make us worthy of these truly brave kids who in your words “go for broke.” I am grateful that I still have the chance to enter into that precious space, one full of the trust that exists in real and rare teaching, the trust and the surprise, the wonder and the love.

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